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ABSTRACT

The objective of this monograph on adolescent stress is to make advisers more aware of what teenagers are experiencing. The focus is on individuals from the ages of 10 to 18 and the special types of stress that occur to them. The first chapter discusses recognizing and understanding stress. Physical, psychological, and social effects of stress are described. The second chapter discusses the particular stressors for teenagers, noting that the period of early adolescence is a stressful state in the life cycle. A list of events ranked as most stressful by adolescents is included. Coping strategies are discussed in the third chapter. Stressors and strains are defined. Physical exercise, proper diet, relaxation and meditation, conversation, and goal setting are described as skills for stress reduction. The relationship of resources to stress is discussed in chapter four. Twenty-six tips for advisers and school staff on dealing with stress are listed. These range from not expecting too much from one's students to supporting positive peer relationships through team building activities. A 12-item bibliography is included. (ABL)

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Adolescent Stress

by

Jan D'Onofrio and Ed Klesse

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FOREWORD

The authors have written this monograph on adolescent stress to make advisers more aware of what teenagers are experiencing. The book addresses individuals from the ages of 10 to 18 and the special types of stress that occur then.

When discussing stress, it is important for us to know the stressors that teens are experiencing and how they are affected by them. It is also critical to understand that stressful activities can be successfully completed, but over a period of time. Stress accumulates. Just adding one more activity to an already busy schedule can be too much to handle. As you inventory your own stress levels, we hope you will become more sensitive to the stress levels of students. I encourage you to know the participants in your activity beyond the club meeting, the team practice, or the fundraiser. At the same time, I ask that, as advisers, we all keep the activity that we are supervising in perspective. Listen to the students, determine their needs, and when measuring the effectiveness or usefulness of an activity, don't measure the success by the outcome. Instead, measure it by the process, and what you and your students gained as participants in student activities.

Dale D. Hawley
Director
NASSP Division of Student Activities

CHAPTER 1

Recognizing and Understanding Stress

- Stress — The state of tension that is created when a person responds to the demands and pressures that come from the outside and those that come from the inside (Miller et al., 1987).

- Stress — A force, pressure, strain, or strong effort with reference primarily to a person or to a person's organs or mental powers (Cooper, 1981).

- Stress — Derived from the Latin "stringere," meaning "to draw tight." (Thoresen & Eagleston, 1983).

Stress is the body's general response to any demand made upon it. Stress is physical. It causes real and measurable changes in many bodily functions, such as blood pressure, hormone production, and the lymphatic system. Stress is particularly apparent during major life events—those situations that combine powerful demands and often strong reactions in people, such as the divorce of one's parents, death of a close family member, major personal injury or illness, or moving to a new school.

Stress is a complex biological phenomenon that is influenced by psychological, sociological, physiological, and physical factors. A number of studies have shown that stress is both additive and cumulative (Miller et al., 1987). Too many stressors at once, or too much stress over time without recovery periods, can combine to create a total burden of demands and pressures.

Some people are more vulnerable to stress, and all of us vary from time to time in our individual vulnerability. Vulnerability to stress is determined by a set of complex interactions among our biological predispositions, which include health, lifestyle, and financial, spiritual, and social resources for coping with stress.

Stress is defined as a type of transaction between a person and an environment that occurs when the environment or internal demands of a situation tax or exceed the person's resources for managing them, or when the person's well-being is endangered (Danzi, 1986).

Stress is essentially a biological concept concerned with a living being adapting itself to the circumstances of living. Stress immediately brings to mind the efforts required to overcome it. It is a reaction to some stimulus and represents a psychophysiological reaction, or involves a complex mind/body interrelationship. Some stress is beneficial, impelling individuals to accomplish greater tasks. Under other conditions, however, it becomes harmful when permitted to build up to a point where an excess level is reached.

Recognizing Stress

Each of us is unique and each of us responds differently to stress. When calculating the amount of stress we are under, it is vital to take into account all the sources. Even if nothing dramatic has just happened to you, you still may be subjected to a lot of stress (Cohen and Cohen, 1984).

In 1983, Crowder explained stress:

- As a response affecting everyone—young and old.
- As external and internal—real and imagined problems and fears.
- Response to stress is a complex relationship—not everyone is affected in the same way.
- As a possible cause for physical illness, if it is not controlled.
- As possible to control, but treatment may not be simple. Relieving stress often proves difficult.

Crowder goes on to explain that one must develop the ability to identify personal stressors through past experiences.

Early stress symptoms include:

1. Difficulty in thinking rationally and seeing all aspects of a problem.
2. Rigidity of views, prejudice.
3. Out-of-place aggression and irritability.
4. Withdrawal from relationships.
5. Excessive smoking.
6. An inability to relax resulting in excessive drinking or a need for sleeping pills (Cooper, 1981).

Understanding Stress

Your body can tolerate certain levels of stress, but excessive stress can make you physically ill. It can also make you emotionally depressed, create mental confusion, and lead to irrational behavior.

There are three stages to the stress reaction:

1. The sharp alarm reaction when the body's resistance drops suddenly and dramatically.

2. As stress continues, there is a longer stage of resistance, where the body's functions appear to return to normal.

3. If long term, the stage of exhaustion is reached and the body's resistance drops sharply once again (Cohen and Cohen, 1984).

Stress can be produced by physical agents such as injury, or by mental and emotional agents such as fear and anxiety.

While stress is usually associated with negative actions or emotions, it is also produced by positive actions or emotions. Winning a prize can be as stressful as losing one.

Stress affects us:

Physically — Dysfunctions include loss of appetite, high blood pressure, ulcers, digestive disorders, physical exhaustion, bronchial asthma, allergies, and skin disorders.

Psychologically — Problems are fatigue, boredom, low job interest, irritability, depression, insomnia, and low self-esteem.

Socially — Often seen in a breakdown in interpersonal relations, isolation and withdrawal, an unwillingness to accept responsibility, and failure at ordinary daily tasks.

Individuals make two interdependent assessments of stressful situations, primary and secondary appraisal. Primary appraisal describes what is at stake for the person: (a) harm-loss, (b) threat, or (c) challenge. Harm-loss refers to any kind of harm, loss, or damage. Threat refers to anticipated harm, loss, or change. Challenge refers to an opportunity for mastery, growth, and gain, and implies that the individual can bring about a favorable outcome. Secondary appraisal describes what a person can do about a situation. Four modes of secondary appraisal are possible: Direct action, acceptance, seeking information, and inhibiting action (Danzi, 1986).

The effects of long-term stress can be devastating. Our personalities seem to change. Occasionally, we may feel tense and explosive. Sometimes we find ourselves compulsively repeating meaningless tasks in an attempt to control our lives. At times, we act impulsively without thinking about the consequences. At other times, we have exaggerated fears of simple acts such as leaving our house, traveling by airplane, or riding in an elevator. The changes in experience after long-term stress may have many causes. These causes may be very complex or as subtle as learning an unhealthy response. Whether the cause is simple or complex, the problem

physical or mental, stress can intensify our difficulties.

Both the environmental stimulus and reacting individual are vital elements and the nature of the relationship between the two is crucial (Cooper, 1981). Stress refers, ther., to a very broad class of problems differentiated from other problem areas because it deals with any demands that tax the system—whether it is a physiological system, a social system, or a psychological system—and the response of that system. The reaction depends on how the person interprets or appraises (consciously or unconsciously) the significance of a harmful, threatening, or challenging event (testing, breaking up).

The cognitive appraisal is an essentially individual-based affair: The appraisal of threat is not a simple perception of the elements of the situation, but a judgment, an inference in which the data are assembled to a constellation of ideas and expectations. The cognitive element is the vital link between the individual's environment and his or her experience of stress.

The struggle one experiences in trying to cope with demands successfully—the experience of imbalance—occurs across four major modes of influence:

Cognitive: Self-talking, attributions, beliefs about self

Physiological: Change in neurohormonal production, blood pressure, heart rate, and muscle tension

Behavioral: Speech content and stylistics, gestures, facial expressions

Environmental: Parents in home setting, peers at school.

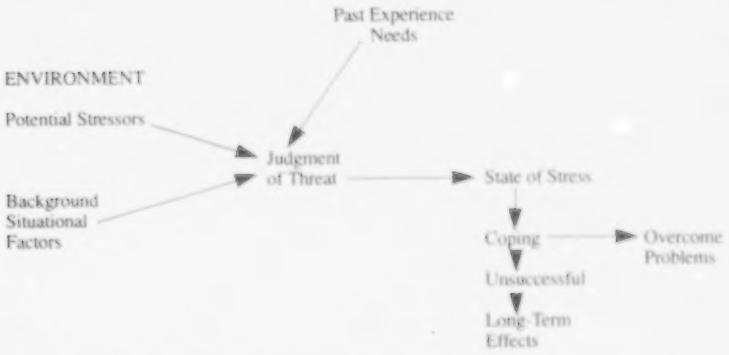
Further, most experiences take place in three major life settings: home, work or school, and community (Thoresen & Eagleston, 1983).

The experience of stress, especially chronic stress, obviously has more immediate consequences before the development of a recognizable physical or mental disease. Responses may be harmful or maladaptive— "miscoping." Miscoping responses can include behavioral and environmental responses such as social withdrawal, alcohol or drug use, or truancy. In the cognitive area, an imbalance of demand and resources could result in feelings of low self-esteem and beliefs about being a failure. Related is the possible evolution of "learned hopelessness," the belief that one's actions essentially are unrelated to the consequences that are experienced.

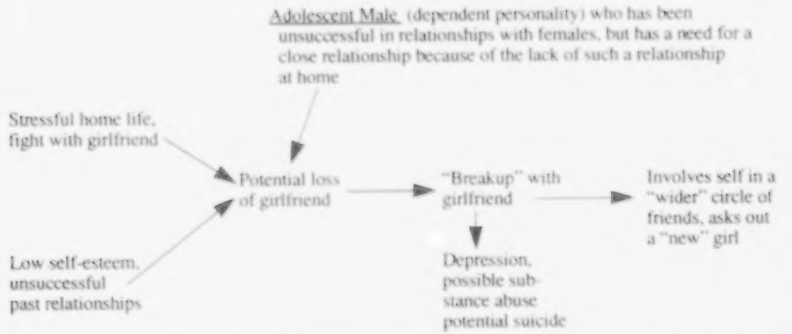
INDIVIDUAL/ENVIRONMENT MODEL OF STRESS

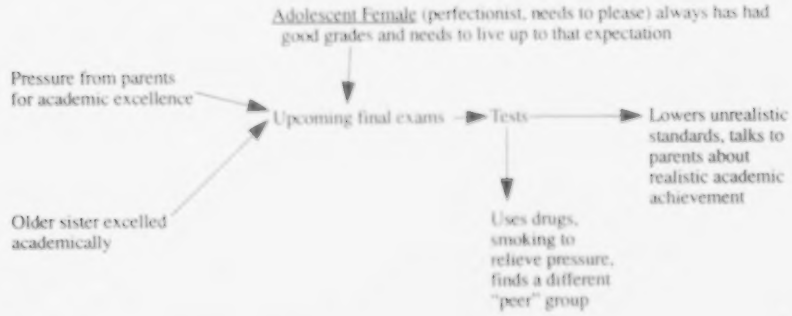
THE INDIVIDUAL

Attitudes and Traits



Two examples of how this model actually might work are as follows:


Adolescent Male (dependent personality) who has been unsuccessful in relationships with females, but has a need for a close relationship because of the lack of such a relationship at home
Stressful home life, fight with girlfriend
Potential loss of girlfriend
"Breakup" with girlfriend
Involves self in a "wider" circle of friends, asks out a "new" girl
Low self-esteem, unsuccessful past relationships
Depression, possible substance abuse potential suicide


Adolescent Female (perfectionist, needs to please) always has had good grades and needs to live up to that expectation
Pressure from parents for academic excellence
Upcoming final exams
Tests
Lowers unrealistic standards, talks to parents about realistic academic achievement
Older sister excelled academically
Uses drugs, smoking to relieve pressure, finds a different "peer" group

CHAPTER 2

Stress and Teenagers

The teenage years are a time of unprecedented change, both physical and social. Change results in stress, and so despite what is often said, instead of these being the happiest years of one's life, they may be the most stress filled (Cohen and Cohen, 1984). Young people, however, have an abundant supply of adaptive energy and are able, therefore, to recover from the ill effects of excessive stress more rapidly than older people.

There are stressors that affect all of us and stressors that affect some of us more specifically than they affect others. Increasingly, scholars have come to view the period of early adolescence (10-15 years) as a specific and stressful state in the life cycle. The changes that occur include:

Hormonal Changes — In the span of a few years, the young person changes outwardly from a child to an adult. Mood, affect, or interest in the young adolescent is as predictable as a kite in a variable March wind.

Preoccupation with Self — Common beliefs among many teenagers are that they are the object of all surrounding attention and that they are being evaluated by those around them.

Peer Relationships — Where in past times the identity of young adolescents was shaped by their relationships with adults, it is from peer relationships that today's young people gain a sense of who they are.

Family Relationships — The family remains a powerful influence in the life of the adolescent. It is no longer, however, the primary influence.

Educational Changes — With everything else changing around and about the early adolescent, his or her relationship with education also changes. The move from primary to secondary education de-emphasizes the relationship between teacher and pupil and accents the acquisition of knowledge.

Role Changes — Unlike their predecessors, today's early adolescents have few opportunities to play useful roles in their communities

(Gullotta, 1983).

Teenagers also face the developmental stresses of adolescence in addition to family, social, and school stresses peculiar to adolescence. Stress can lead to teenage "acting out" of psychological conflict, absenteeism, poor grades, dropping out of school, teenage pregnancy, and generally poor preparation for adult life. The most serious cost of stress is the loss of life due to stress-related teenage suicide.

Teenagers deal with fundamental issues of change that are intimately personal and central to them as individuals. They are caught in the process of a biological transformation that leaves them somewhere between childhood and adulthood. Parental and societal demands and expectations are confused and often conflicting, but almost always intense. The demands and expectations teenagers place upon themselves are even more intense, contradictory, and confused than those that come from the outside.

Adolescence is a period of human development characterized by a complex set of developmental tasks or demands that move the young person from childhood to young adulthood. Adolescents are confronted with managing the physiological changes of puberty, integrating increased cognitive capacity with life experience, achieving expectations of increasing independence from parents and family, developing appropriate social roles with same and opposite sex peers, completing academic requirements, choosing and planning for an occupation, and evolving a set of values to guide adult roles.

Today's adolescent youth are subjected to stress and pressure in many activities and encounters throughout the day. They are faced with increased personal decisions and responsibilities. They are concerned with rejection by their peer group and friends.

Potential Demands

Physiological	Cognitive
Growth	Self-Evaluations (e.g., desire to be perfect)
Puberty	Values Conflicts (e.g., parents vs. peers)
- sex characteristics	Defining rol · expectations
- ability to reproduce	Developing a basis for self-esteem
- hormonal changes	Setting future goals
Physical health and fitness	Understanding and responding to fears and feelings (e.g., intimacy, isolation, guilt)

Behavioral	Environmental
Changing friendship patterns	Relationships with parents and siblings
Dating	Parental expectations
Sexual Behavior	Relationships with teachers and other adults
Separating from parents	Peer pressure
Academic performance	School structure changes
Cocurricular activities	Change in legal status

(Thoresen & Eagleston, 1983)

Ranked as most stressful by adolescents:

1. A parent dying.
2. Close friend dying.
3. Brother or sister dying.
4. Parents getting divorced or separated.*
5. Parent or relative (other than self) getting very sick.
6. Family member (other than self) having trouble with alcohol.
7. Getting arrested by police.
8. Flunking a grade in school.
9. Getting into drugs or alcohol.
10. Parent losing a job.
11. Losing a favorite pet.
12. Failing one or more subjects.
13. Breaking up with a close girlfriend or boyfriend. (See Individual/Environmental Model of Stress.)
14. Getting badly hurt or sick.
15. Close girlfriend getting pregnant.
16. Quitting school.
17. Hassling with parents.
18. Going to a new school.**
19. Losing a job.
20. Trouble with teacher or principal.

(Forman, Eidson, and Hagan, 1983)

* Divorce has a very stressful effect on children that can carry over well into their adult years. When divorced parents remarry, and both parties bring children to the new marriage, the problems are often compounded

(Miller et al., 1987). However, children living in an unhappy (stressful) marriage also experience a great deal of stress.

** Adolescents deal differently with relocation stress. Boys are seen as missing friends more, and girls were more involved in joining clubs and making friends in the new school. The number of moves is important in relocation stress with first-time movers having the most difficulty. Why the family moved is also important. Those families where all members saw a reason to move, and were in agreement, were seen as adjusting better. The two factors said to be critical in the adjustment of children to a relocation were (1) whether the children formed new friendships in their new community and (2) the mother's attitude to the move.

(Donahue and Gullotta, 1983)

CHAPTER 3

Coping

We define coping behavior as the conscious and/or behavioral responses of an individual to reduce or manage demands. Coping may come in two forms which address separate dimensions of a stressful situation but are often complementary: problem focused and emotion regulation. The latter regulates a person's emotional reaction to a situation because stressful events generate a number of powerful and at times contradictory emotions. Problem focused coping attempts to relieve the problem by changing or improving the situation.

Examples of this are:

1. Direct action to eliminate or reduce demands and/or to increase resources for managing these demands.

2. Redefining demands to make them more manageable.

Generally, coping is understood as a good way to handle problems with the individual reaching out and within for resources to come to terms with difficulties. However, coping can also be a source of strain. Adolescents may adopt coping behaviors that propel them into other stressful circumstances, which may in turn add to their burdens of responsibility and difficulties.

Adolescents appear to acquire coping behaviors and styles from at least four different sources: (1) previous personal experiences in handling similar situations; (2) vicarious experience associated with observing the success or failure of others, especially family members; (3) perceptions of their own physiology and inferences they make about their vulnerability; and (4) social persuasion, particularly by parents, peers, and significant others (Patterson and Hamilton, 1987).

Coping behavior has been viewed as one important component of psychosocial competence by which an adolescent is able to balance and manage the developmental tasks of this stage of the lifecycle. The coping process is particularly important in adolescence because the young person is confronted with many life stressors and strains for the first time and has

not yet developed a repertoire of coping responses from which to draw. Adolescents are often at high risk, because their intense energy coupled with minimal experience with new demands often results in extreme reactions leading to potentially serious consequences. The coping style that emerges from these efforts during adolescence has long-term consequences in that it shapes the coping style of adulthood. Adolescent coping is not simply a matter of knowing what to do. It involves a flexible orchestration of cognitive, social, and behavioral skills dealing with situations that contain elements of ambiguity, unpredictability, and stress.

Adolescents are rarely dealing with a single demand. Over time, they must contend with an ever-changing set of demands coming from their own development, as well as the development of other family members, the family unit, and from the community. There are two types of demands: stressors and strains. Stressors are events that occur at a distinct point of time, and call for change. Strains are the unresolved hardships of prior stressors.

Coping Strategies

1. Attempting to avoid all stress is neither possible nor wise. The body and mind appear to need an outlet for their energies. If they don't have proper and productive outlets, these energies turn destructively inward.

2. Small, repeated irritations or little hassles account for much of the stress in our lives. Therefore, doing something about them can be one of the most effective ways of lowering the total load of stress we feel.

3. Specific stress can be relieved by switching the stress to another part of the body or mind. If you are feeling tired after studying, get out and take a long walk or run—switch the stress from mind to body.

4. Physical activity, from running to exercise to relaxation techniques, can help to relieve the muscle tension caused by stress and thus reduce the ill effects caused by stress in general.

5. Often, mental stress is coped with effectively by "thinking about something else," not worrying about a problem while in a highly stressed state.

6. Risk taking is another dangerous and ultimately ineffective method of coping with the negative side of stress. Using risks to cope with stress

is merely adding more stress to your life.

7. "Stress is the spice of life." The highs and lows of the stressful teen years are part of life. Enjoy the highs and try not to dwell on the lows (Cohen and Cohen, 1984). Talk to someone about stress if there are too many lows and not enough highs.

8. Trying to reduce the uncomfortable and unpleasant feelings caused by excess stress through the use of drugs or alcohol is counterproductive and can be dangerous. Instead of lowering stress, you actually increase it.

9. Don't underestimate the value of time. The fatigue and depression that so often result from the stress of a major event eventually go away because of the body's natural ability to restore adaptative energy. The process is automatic, but it takes time.

10. Clarify your values. Know when you are experiencing stress because you are going along with something you really don't believe in. Sort out what you feel are your values and those that you've been trying to internalize but are not really comfortable with. It is more stressful when you try to compromise your values than when you take a stand for what you believe. Be yourself.

Several skills for stress reduction are:

Physical exercise — Swimming, running, vigorous walking.

Proper diet — Provides good nutrition for good health.

Relaxation and meditation — For a few minutes or for an extended period of time.

Conversation — To share difficulties and personal problems with one or more friends.

Goal setting — Be realistic and set goals that can be achieved (Crowder, 1983).

CHAPTER 4

Resources and Tips

Resources are the means we use, both human and material, to meet demands. Some examples of personal resources are knowledge, skills, personality traits, emotional and physical health, and self-esteem. Some important family resources that help manage stressful demands include cohesion, flexibility, organization, good parent-adolescent communication, and conflict resolution skills. At the community level, resources such as medical and educational services, and social support networks are important both for directly meeting family member needs, and for overcoming the negative effects of stressors and strains. Over time, the adolescent's repertoire of resources changes in response to the nature of the demands.

Resources are useful in balancing demands with responses, and these include: (1) physical and biochemical resources (auto-immune system); (2) material and physical resources (money, physical strength, shelter, clothing); (3) cognitive and emotional resources (acquired knowledge, intellectual capacity, self-concept); (4) orientation resources (anticipating and evaluating events, planning and preparing, tolerating frustration, flexibility, foresightedness, and rationality); (5) interpersonal and relational resources (number of close friends, commitment to others, social skills, assertiveness); and (6) social and cultural resources (socio-economic level, family background, religion, and mass media) (Thoresen & Eagleston, 1983).

The use of alcohol, smoking, and drugs may represent maladaptive coping behaviors triggered by faulty or incomplete appraisals of stressful work situations (Danzi, 1986). For example, a teenager who does not like working under pressure may increase his or her use of cigarettes, alcohol, or drugs to release tension. If the situation was appraised as one that could be changed, leading to a reduction in pressure, such deleterious coping behaviors would not be needed. Even when it is not feasible to change a stressful situation, it is possible to explore other methods of managing emotions, such as meditation, "talking it out" with a friend, or exercising.

If the body is generally healthy, it can tolerate more stress. Good nutrition, adequate exercise and sleep, and supportive emotional resources

reduce vulnerability. Limiting the introduction of harmful substances, such as narcotics, alcohol, caffeine, or other drugs also allows us to function more effectively.

The importance of *timely help* with the stresses of the teen years cannot be overemphasized. The delayed impact of poorly managed stress during the teen years can be unnecessarily debilitating in adulthood. Understanding and help with stress issues during the teen years can do much to make the transition to happy adulthood easier and more successful. Teachers and school counselors are in a unique position to provide that timely help. They can provide the necessary structure for coping with the confused and difficult teen years.

Tips for Advisers and School Staff

1. Improve your own awareness of the symptoms of stress in adolescents and act accordingly when dealing with young people.

2. Increase your awareness of the symptoms of stress in the adolescents you work with by attending workshops, health education class activities, a "social issues awareness day" (when stress and similar topics can be discussed), and through your own student advising.

3. Be available to talk with your students and offer concrete suggestions (put together a "Stress Brochure" for student use) as well as simply being a good listener.

4. Recognize when stress levels indicate a referral to a more highly trained staff member (school counselor, nurse, school psychologist).

5. Success builds upon success. Students become more self-confident and better able to handle stress when their successes are recognized by themselves and others. Future endeavors build upon these successes.

6. Don't expect too much too soon from your students. Tailor your advising to *their* needs.

7. Always be aware that what is stressful for one adolescent may not be stressful for another. Stress is unique. Respond to each individual as an individual. Don't push. Support and encourage.

8. A good sense of humor, used appropriately, can help cut through stress. Remember, a helping person tries to understand adolescents and is

concerned about them. A helping person is someone who can give *or* suggest help when it is needed without causing embarrassment.

9. Set rules, procedures, and consequences, if necessary, when working with adolescents. Make it easy for adolescents to understand what is expected of them and how they can be successful.

10. Be a positive role model, making it easy for others to learn from you by following your leadership. Make it easy for students to interact with you. Be committed!

11. Talk to other teachers, advisers, or counselors about any of your students who display irritability, anxiety, depression, fatigue, boredom, or low self-esteem. Adopt a "team approach" to helping.

12. Maintain good communication with parents. Keep in mind that about 25 percent of all public school students come from a single-parent family. The more you know about your students, the more you will understand them.

13. The sooner we identify stress and begin to deal with the problem, the better. Recognize the problem—name it, focus on it, and plan a course of action.

14. Provide positive feedback to all who do well. Look for "steps" in the right direction and reinforce them along the way.

15. Support positive peer relationships through team building activities. Social skills will improve and a supportive environment will develop. Build connectedness.

16. Teach adolescents to respect themselves. Help them to accept who they are, their strengths and weaknesses. Help them to understand what talents they can develop and to appreciate their gifts.

17. Help adolescents learn to listen to themselves. Their feelings and opinions are valid and important. Students with positive self-esteem are more receptive to new thoughts and risk taking. They experience less stress.

18. Set realistic goals. Achievements create a sense of accomplishment and pride. Teach students to set reasonable, clear, and concise goals.

19. Help adolescents learn to like themselves, to be as gentle and kind with themselves as they would like others to be with them and as they would be with others.

20. Help adolescents to believe in themselves as capable, significant, successful, and worthy. They will be better adjusted, more independent, less defensive, and have a greater acceptance of others.

21. Help adolescents to evaluate realistically. Discover what is working and do more of it. Discover what is not working and do less of it. Try something new and see what happens.

22. FEAR = Fantasized Experiences Appearing Real (Canfield, 1989). Fear breeds stress. Remember, most fears are self-imposed and unrealistic.

23. Satisfaction means action. Take action. Don't allow stress to cause paralysis and inaction.

24. Praise yourself for your successes.

25. Teach your students to recognize symptoms of stress in their peers and to respond in a supportive and encouraging manner.

26. Relax. Take time away from the tasks at hand and start again when everyone is "fresh."

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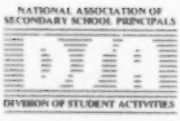

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